

The Socio-Economic contexts of the 19th century England and the 21st century India: A Comparison with reference to select novels of Jane Austen and their film adaptations

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Abstract

The present paper focuses on the socio-economic contexts of the 19th century England and the 21st century India: A comparison with special reference to Jane Austen's two novels namely 'Pride and Prejudice' and 'Emma' with their Bollywood adaptations namely 'Bride and Prejudice' (2004) and 'Aisha' (2010) respectively. The socio-economic contexts of the 19th century England is presented through both the novels whereas the socio-economic context of the 21st century India is presented through both movies based on these novels. Jane Austen's novels are read all over the world and apart from that many of her novels have been adapted into Hollywood and Bollywood movies. The present paper throws light on the similarities and differences in the socio-economic context of 19th century England and 21st century India by comparing various aspects like the portrayal of characters, patriarchal society, social hypocrisy, realism, fairy tale element, feminist themes, etc. as depicted in the novels and films.

Key words: novels, film, adaptation, characters, theme.

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R J Rees introduces foreign readers to the development of Novel in 18th century as "By about 1770 the reading of novels had become a fashion – almost a mania – with 'upper class' women. ... The novel had become what the cinema became in the 1920s and 1930s: a gateway into the world of pleasant dreams." (106) In any book on history of English Literature we can observe that early nineteenth-century literature is influenced by poets like William Wordsworth, S. T. Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Byron, P. B. Shelley, and John Keats. Apart from them prose writers like Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincey, and W. S. Landor also contributed to the contemporary literature through their essays and imaginary conversations. This literary journey was further proceeded by Sydney Smith, John Wilson, John G. Lockhart, William Cobbett, Henry Hart Milman through their contributions by collection of letters, novels, journals and historical works respectively.

In the area of novel writing, Jane Austen was the greatest woman novelist during the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Mundra 514). She was one of the supreme artists in fiction. She used this form to give minute and loving pictures of English middle-class life. She wrote six novels in all namely *Sense & Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1815), *Persuasion* (1817) and *Northanger Abbey* (1817). *Persuasion* and *Northanger Abbey* were published posthumously.

The Socio-economic contexts of the nineteenth century England in the novels of Jane Austen:

In the present paper, two novels namely *Pride & Prejudice* and *Emma* by Jane Austen have been selected to look upon the socio-economic contexts of nineteenth-century England. An effort has been made to show the 19th century England through the eyes of Jane Austen as depicted in her above-mentioned novels.

"Of the six novels Jane Austen wrote, *Pride and Prejudice* is the most famous and probably the best" (Rees 119). *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) is the story of the Bennet

sisters: Jane, Elizabeth, Mary, Kitty and Lydia. Their mother wants them to make good weddings because they won't inherit their family's house, only a son can inherit it. So when Mr. Bingley a rich man from the north of England comes into their neighborhood, their mother tries in every way to make Mr. Bingley falling in love with one of her daughters. Mr. Bingley actually falls in love with Jane and Jane falls in love with him. In the meantime, Mr. Darcy, Mr. Bingley's friend who spends with him his holiday, falls in love with Elizabeth. He also makes her a proposal, but she refuses. In fact she hates him because a young soldier Mr. Wickham told her that Darcy has a dark past, he isn't worth trusting in. At the same time Mr. Bingley leaves his house and goes to London abandoning Jane who finds her hopes deceived. One of Darcy's relatives tells Elizabeth that it was Darcy who convinced Mr. Bingley to leave Jane and go to London. So Elizabeth's hate towards Darcy grows more and more. But when Elizabeth's youngest sister Lydia runs away with Mr. Wickham, Darcy finds them in London and persuades Wickham to marry Lydia by paying him much money. When Elizabeth knows how Darcy helped her sister, she changes her mind, realizes that she loves him, too, and accepts his wedding proposal. In the meanwhile, Bingley comes back and asks Jane to marry him and she accepts. So there's a happy end: Jane marries Bingley and Elizabeth marries Darcy.

In Austen's other novel *Emma* (1815), young and beautiful Emma Woodhouse meddles in the love lives of her friends. Emma's governess, Miss Taylor, marries. Having introduced Miss Taylor to her husband, Emma feels overconfident about her match-making abilities. She takes the young, susceptible Harriet Smith under her wing and convinces her not to marry Robert Martin, a prosperous and intelligent farmer whom Emma doesn't think fashionable enough to marry. A series of romantic misunderstandings take place. Emma assumes that Elton wants to marry Harriet, but in fact, Elton wants Emma. Frank Churchill also tries to court her, but Emma falls for Mr. Knightley, whom everyone believes to love Jane Fairfax. A series of misunderstandings eventually teaches Emma that she doesn't know what's best for everyone. She then finds happiness with her beloved Mr. Knightley.

In reading a Jane Austen novel, we come to appreciate more easily the techniques of the novels: her methods of characterization, her construction of plot, her subtlety of dialogue. Jane Austen's novels focus on two or three families of the middle or upper classes. She omits the lower classes, servants and labourers. She hardly touches the aristocracy, and if she does, it is only to satirise it. She collects raw material to depict various aspects of English contemporary society in her novels from the daily routine of visits, shopping, gossip, and other trivial matters, etc. Tea parties and balls are the most important events in her novels. The characters pass their time in balls, dinners, walks, playing cards and visiting friends only. That depicts the scenario of society in early 19th century England. There are no murders or gory crimes in her novels. There are no adventures or any mystery. The most thrilling events are nothing more than elopements or running away marriages and walking three miles in the forest by a heroine. There are no great villains, no saints, no eccentric characters, no cynics, and no passionate people in Austen's English Society.

In early 19th century, marriage was a big issue facing women and men of her time, often financial considerations were important in deciding marriage. These financial considerations are often satirized by Austen. In *Pride and Prejudice* the mother is ridiculed for her ambition to get her daughters married for maximum financial remuneration.

Austen's novel is principally concerned with the social fabric of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England, a patriarchal society in which men held the economic and social power. In an often satirical portrait of the men and women attempting to gain a livelihood, Austen subtly and ironically points out faults in the system, raising questions about the values of English society and the power structure of the country.

The scenes of action of all her novels are set in South England where she lived. Austen's novels also reveal no awareness of national and international affairs. Austen is Neo-Classical in her order and discipline. She supported the traditional values and established norms and presented the human values in the most comic spirit. The industrial revolution changed the British economy. It also created a large wealthy class

and an even large middle class. The effects of the industrial revolution were not felt in her novels. During her period England was at the height of its power. Her novels do not reveal that England was ruling over the number of countries in the world. There is no obscurity, no vulgarity but she limits herself strictly to the depiction of personal relations.

The Socio-economic contexts of the 21st century India in the movies based on novels of Jane Austen:

Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* has been adapted into a Bollywood movie namely *Bride and Prejudice (2004)*. In India, the location of the movie is set in Amritsar. The story centers on the beautiful Lalitha Bakshi (played by Aishawarya Rai) and her mother's attempts to marry off her and her three sisters. When a rich American hotel heir named William Darcy (played by Martin Henderson) and his best friend Balraj Bingley (played by Naveen Andrews) arrive in Amritsar, India to attend a wedding, Lalitha and her older sister Jaya (Namrata Shirodkar) are immediately drawn to the two men. Although Jaya and Balraj share an immediate love connection, Lalitha is put off by Darcy's snobbery and disdain for life in India. When Lalitha travels to a seaside resort at Goa, with her sister she meets Johnny Wickham (Daniel Gillies), a handsome young man to whom she is immediately attracted. When Johnny tells her that he is a former childhood acquaintance of Mr. Darcy, Lalitha's poor opinion of Darcy is made worse by the horrible things that Johnny tells her about his character. When Lalitha learns that Darcy convinced Balraj not to propose to Jaya, she is infuriated. As Darcy becomes jealous of her relationship with Johnny, Darcy tells Lalitha that he loves her and wants to make a life with her. Disturbed by all that she has learned about Darcy from outside sources, Lalitha cruelly rejects his proposal. When Wickham proves himself to be a dastardly character by running off with Lalitha's impressionable young sister Lucky (played by Peeya Rai Chowdhary), Lalitha is forced to realize that she was wrong about Darcy's character. In the end, Darcy helps in saving the life of Lucky rather than ruining in the hands of wicked Wickham. Impressed by this nobility in Darcy's character, Lalitha accepts his proposal and marries him.

Another novel by Jane Austen *Emma* is adapted into an Indian movie named *Aisha* (2010). It is the story of a girl with the title name. Aisha (Sonam Kapoor) is a young, rich, upper-class woman who believes that she is perfectly suited for match-making – amongst her friends in particular. Her superficial lifestyle and match-making schemes are constantly criticized by her friend/neighbour Arjun (Abhay Deol), who advises her to stop meddling with the lives of other people. Soon, she has a new project - trying to make a match between her middle class, small-town friend Shefali (Amrita Puri) and a rich business owner, Randhir (Cyrus Sahukar). Aisha creates various circumstances to make Shefali and Randhir fall in love. During one such occasion, she meets her aunt's step-son Dhruv Singh (Arunoday Singh), whom she becomes attracted to. In the meantime, Arjun introduces Aisha to one of his colleagues, Aarti Menon (Lisa Haydon), who is from New York. Aisha feels threatened by Aarti's presence and is very antagonistic towards her.

Randhir organizes a river rafting camp for everyone, and Aisha uses this as a chance to get Randhir and Shefali to spend more time together. One night during the camp, Randhir takes Aisha for a walk and then confesses his love for her. Confused and taken aback by Randhir's feelings for her, Aisha starts to doubt her matchmaking skills. Arjun comes to know of the incident and gets angry at Aisha, criticizing her for once again meddling with the lives of others, and playing with Shefali's feelings. Aisha tries to console a heartbroken Shefali, who had previously turned down a marriage proposal in order to be with Randhir, on Aisha's advice. As time passes, Pinky (Ira Dubey), Aisha's best friend starts to develop feelings for Randhir and eventually they are engaged. This causes a problem between Pinky and Aisha, and they stop speaking to each other.

Disheartened with her previous failed matchmaking attempt, Aisha tries to match up Shefali with Dhruv. Shefali comes to know of Aisha's plan and confronts her, telling Aisha that she never viewed her as a friend, rather as a project, someone whom she tried to mould and fix. Shefali then declares that she has feelings for Arjun. This greatly confuses and hurts Aisha, since she realises that she has been in love with Arjun all this time. Aisha realises that she has been selfish and arrogant all along, playing with the emotions and feelings of her friends. She goes back to her best friend, Pinky, and

apologizes for her actions. Dhruv and Aarti get engaged, but Aisha chooses not to attend since she thinks that Arjun will be there with Shefali. After a late-night conversation with her father, Aisha decides spontaneously to go to the engagement and declare her feelings to Arjun. She meets Shefali, who tells her that love cannot be forced or planned, and also reveals that she has found her love in Saurabh, her childhood friend whose proposal she had previously turned down. Later that night, Arjun and Aisha meet and reminisce about their childhood and friendship, and ultimately declare their love for each other. The movie ends one year later, at Dhruv and Aarthi's wedding, where Aisha states that love is spontaneous and never goes according to plan.

Both movies are adaptations of Jane Austen's early 19th century novels. "These adaptations present their own version of the text that is in tune with the changing thought process of the world around us" (Archana Bhagwat 444). In the novel society of contemporary England is depicted by Austen through the characters of Elizabeth, Darcy, Jane, Bingley, Caroline, Lydia, Wickham, Mrs. Bannet etc. whereas in *Bride and Prejudice*, the director Gurinder Chadha narrates the same story through the characters of Lalitha, William Darcy, Jaya, Balraj, Johnny Wickham, Lakhi, Mrs. Bakshi, etc. Whether there are Indian names or English, the Director describes India's customs as similar to that of given in Austen's novel. Daughters are still married off to wealthy men and the oldest must marry before any of her sisters are allowed to enter society. This film holds true to many Indian customs that still reflect Jane Austen's world. In the novels, names of places like Derbyshire, Kent, Long bourn, Netherfield Park, Hartfield, Highbury, etc. refers to England whereas places like Golden Temple, market area, farms, Airport of Amritsar and beaches of Goa, areas in Delhi, Bombay, etc. present Indian context in the movies. By reading novels, we don't get an idea about characters' costumes but in movies by the different dressing styles during different occasions like dandiya, marriage function, campfire on the beach, dinner parties, we can see the social picture of early 21st century India. As Dalela and Bhagdikar rightly consider it 'a camera-driven continuous level of excitement or tension' (71).

The following description from *Pride and Prejudice* about the personality of Darcy compared with Bingley gives the readers idea of his socio-economic condition.

Mr. Bingley was good-looking and gentlemanlike; he had a pleasant countenance, and easy, unaffected manners...; but his friend Mr. Darcy soon drew the attention of the room by his fine, tall person,... of his having ten thousand a-year.... the ladies declared he was much handsomer than Mr. Bingley, and his large estate in Derbyshire could then save him from having a most forbidding, disagreeable countenance, and being unworthy to be compared with his friend.
(Austen, 11)

This is rightly mentioned that on the surface, the passage seems to be giving a straightforward description of a group of people, with most of the attention devoted to Mr. Bingley and Mr. Darcy. The greater part of the description is done from the point of view of the other persons present at the ball and that their admiration for Mr. Darcy has more to do with his wealth than with his good looks. Yet the matter is not as simple as that. Admittedly it is encouraging to find that considerations of social behaviour weigh more than considerations of property. (Robin Mayhead, 65-66).

As far as the economical aspect is concerned, In Emma we don't find many class variations. But in *Pride & Prejudice*, leading characters are divided into the Rich and the Upper middle class. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the Bennets are, like Jane Austen herself, members of an educated upper middle class known as the "gentry" or the "landed gentry." Considered socially eligible to mix with the landowning aristocracy, but quite a step beneath them in wealth, resources and precedence, the landed gentry included country squires, military officers and many forms of the clergy; all acceptable roles for the educated younger sons of the aristocracy and their descendants. Gentry may have owned less than 1,000 acres of land, may have leased to tenants or overseen the farming directly and typically lived in the country year-round, visiting London only to take care of occasional legal matters.

Beneath the gentry were the labouring classes of household servants, tenant farmers, merchants and "tradesmen," such as smiths and carpenters, village doctors, town lawyers, and other professionals. Though lower in social standing because their income bore "the taint of trade", many merchants and tradesmen might, in fact, amass considerable wealth and could wind up wealthier than the poorest of the landowners. This was especially true as the Industrial Revolution progressed, pouring more and more wealth into the trade and merchant classes.

For the landowners and the gentry, management of all financial matters was a gentleman's prerogative. By law and by custom, a woman was granted very little control over money. A woman of the upper classes could expect to be granted a "fortune" from her family upon marriage or the death of her father. This lump sum of money would draw interest at a fixed 5 percent from investment in government funds, which would contribute to her husband's income if she were married or would cover her living expenses if she remained single.

Bhatt and Mehta find the early nineteenth century a time when 'the rich became richer and the poor became poorer' (91). A man's income, by contrast, was always reported as a number of pounds (£) "per year," such as Mr. Bingley's "four or five thousand a year." Mr. Bennet draws about £2,000 a year, which would be sufficient to keep the appearance of comfort and respectability; but he bears the financial burden of providing dowries for five daughters. However, his estate is "entailed" upon his death away from the family to be given to a distant branch of the family in lieu of a male Bennet heir. But an income of more than £4,000 a year, like Bingley's, could well-provide for both country and town homes, with all of the modern comforts and latest fashions. Indeed, Mr. Darcy's £10,000 a year has been calculated in recent decades to be worth between \$300,000 and \$800,000 in U.S. dollars.

In the film *Bride and Prejudice*, Mr. Bakshi, father of Lalitha and her other 4 sisters, is dealing with farming business and Lalitha is shown as his helping hand. Similarly, Aisha's father is also a well-to-do official who has his assistant. Both families belong to the upper-middle class. But in *Bride and Prejudice*, love for money and status is clearly

seen in the character of Mrs. Bakshi. She wants each of her daughters to get married to a rich man. So that they, too, can have a life full of comforts. Love for money and status is also clearly seen in the character of Darcy's mother as she wants Lalitha to keep a distance from her son. Mrs. Darcy wants her son to get married to the girl equivalent to her own rich class. If Lalitha would have been born with a silver spoon in her mouth, she definitely would have been the choice of Mrs. Darcy for her son.

Conclusion:

Charles Murray rightly points out in his book 'Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010', "The human impulse behind the isolation of class is as basic as impulses get: People like to be around other people who understand them and to whom they can talk." Man is by nature a social animal and his economic status is his social identity. Thus, socio-economic conditions dominate the relationships in not only 19th century England but also 21st century India. In India today, the society is divided into three classes- the rich, the middle class and the poor. People in each category want their sons and daughters to get married in equivalent or higher than their class. The bride who takes with her a good number of cash, jewellery, electrical appliances, furniture, bedding, crockery, utensils, vehicles, and other household items exhibits her socio-economic class and receives a warm welcome from her in-laws. On the contrary, the bride from the lower middle class or poor class whose parents are not financially able to give dowry to their daughter, are looked upon as socially and economically inferior by groom's family.

For hundreds of years, valuable assets like a big house (villa) of one's own, a luxurious car, golden ornaments, bank balance, etc. have always remained the evaluation criterion for the social status of a successful person. In general, whether it is 19th century England or 21st Century India, the people of both societies are alike. Most of the people are judged on the grounds of their socio-economic status. Rich and Poor still exist. But it would be completely fair to accept what the Canadian musician Chantal Kreviazuk quotes "I really see that socio-economic constraints and pressure contribute

to our mental health in a big way. You come to realize that it's all mental health."
(Brainy Quotes webpage)

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